

# Responsible Government:

## *Investing in the Well-being of Black Fathers, Families and Communities<sup>i</sup>*



*“African American fathers are a strong support to the health and well-being of the family unit. Government should and must play an active role in supporting African American families. This report shows that by investing in the well-being of our Black fathers, we will strengthen the Black family and provide pathways out of poverty and greater opportunities for all.”*

– Rep. Barbara Lee, Chairwoman, Congressional Black Caucus

A nation’s wealth and thus its future can be measured by the well-being of its children. If we measure the wealth of the United States by the well-being of our children, the message is troubling. The United States has the highest child poverty rate among 24 industrialized countries.<sup>1</sup> Within this statistic is an even more troubling picture of “two worlds of childhood,” where Black, Latino, and Native American children experience significantly higher poverty rates than White and Asian children.<sup>2</sup> Children who grow up in poverty face tough odds for positive outcomes in almost every aspect of life—economic, educational and social. While this is true for all children in poverty, research shows that the odds are even steeper for African American children.<sup>3</sup>

Debate continues among the general public and within African American communities as to where responsibility lies for bettering these outcomes and promoting vital, self-sufficient families and communities. Must the government do more? Must Black fathers and families do more? This paper

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<sup>i</sup> Prepared with the support of the Annie E. Casey Foundation by Paula Dressel of JustPartners, Inc., and Stacey Bouchet of Bouchet and Associates Strategic Consulting. The authors thank the following people for their input: Helen Mitchell, William Julius Wilson, Vivian Gadsden, Margaret Simms, Obie Clayton, Ron Mincy, Kirk Harris, Delia Carmen, and Ira Barbell. The findings and conclusions presented here are those of the authors alone. As such, they do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation or those providing input.

suggests that the optimal answer is yes to both questions. The report focuses on **mutual and interlocking responsibility** – in particular, the need for government to address the bigger picture of embedded racial inequities that produce accumulated barriers for African American men, families and communities, and the need for disconnected African American men to embrace familial and civic responsibilities and opportunities, thereby strengthening their communities and younger generations. Fathers’ positive involvement in their children’s lives and men’s positive involvement in their communities are irreplaceable contributions to the strength of African American communities, and thus the strength of our nation.

How men make decisions about fatherhood, become involved fathers, make decisions around marriage, and contribute positively to their communities is inextricably tied to the structural barriers that they face. Too many African American men have to make these decisions within what Catholic Charities USA calls “overlapping threats to the common good” – poverty and racism.<sup>4</sup> This paper summarizes the policies and practices that contribute to inequitable outcomes for African American families, even when these policies and practices are not explicitly race-focused. It also examines the consequences of the message that low opportunity imparts to struggling African Americans about “how the world works” – or doesn’t – for their families and communities. It acknowledges the ultimately self-defeating decisions some individuals may make within a milieu of seemingly few options.

The report documents the progress we can make as a nation when the commitment to mutual responsibility flourishes. Because of recent intentional changes in social policy with regard to fathers -- changes which have received bipartisan support -- measureable strides have been made in the last 15 years in terms of men’s involvement with their children and fulfillment of their financial obligations. These are documented below. Yet, the report also documents how much there is left to do – measures which can take direction from the successes already demonstrated.

This information is timely, in view of H.R.2979: The Julia Carson Responsible Fatherhood and Healthy Families Act of 2009.<sup>ii</sup> Its discussion can be informed by what has been learned from almost two decades of government supports for working families, the impact of welfare reform, and the growth of the Responsible Fatherhood movement. These issues are situated within a context in which African American families have been and are still differentially affected by social policy and practice.

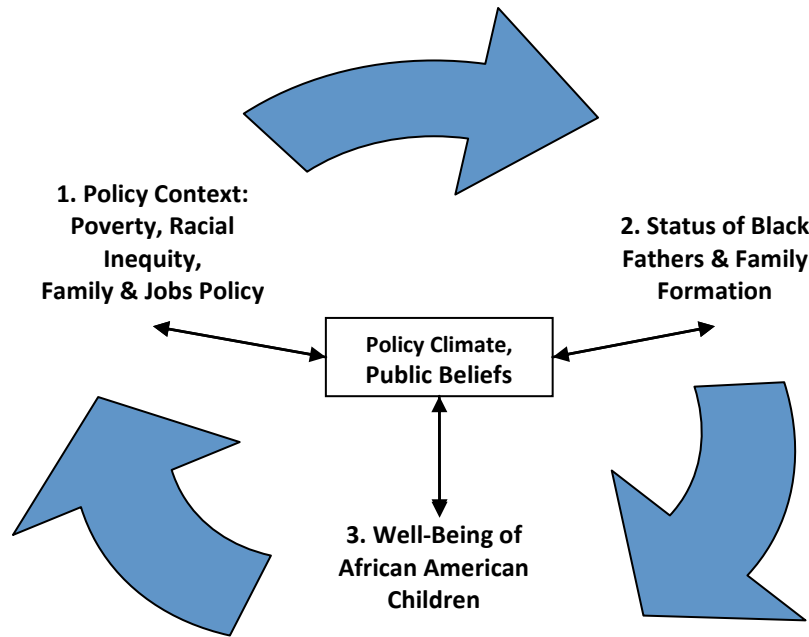
The simplified conceptual platform for this report is offered by Figure 1, which depicts the interlocking and inter-generational nature of these structural, cultural, and policy issues.<sup>iii</sup>

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<sup>ii</sup> The provisions of H.R. 2979, of course, encompass all fathers and families. This paper is intended to describe its features in relation to the context of Black communities.

<sup>iii</sup> This diagram is informed by: R. Dion et.al., *Helping Unwed Parents Build Strong and Healthy Marriages: A Conceptual Framework for Interventions*. Mathematica Policy Research, January, 2003. And Doherty, W., Kouneski, E., & Erickson, M. (1998). *Responsible fathering: An overview and conceptual framework*. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 60, p. 276.

**Figure 1. The Interplay of Structural and Cultural Forces**



Guided by Figure 1, this document:

1. Sets the stage by summarizing **the “bigger picture”** of poverty, racial inequity, and how perceptions of these play out in public policy. With racial inequities rooted from the beginning in the history of our nation, each generation has struggled to perfect an imperfect union. The report documents that too many African American families continue to be impacted today by a long history of limited opportunities in disinvested communities, coupled with family policy that too often undermined family formation and stability. This context becomes essential for understanding how lower-income Black men make meaning of their lives and decisions about their family.
2. Describes **how the bigger picture impacts Black fathers** in particular. Fathers’ ability and choice to fulfill their responsibilities is conditioned by the bigger picture, which includes policies that can be father-friendly or not.
3. Looks at the **effects of fathers’ circumstances and choices** on the well-being of African American children. How children fare is highly dependent on the ability of fathers to fulfill their roles and responsibilities, and the willingness of government to support them in that aspiration.
4. Concludes with an overview of how H.R. 2979 proposes to **reduce the barriers** that stand in the way of too many African American men in their quest to be successful fathers.

## The “Bigger Picture” of Poverty and Racial Inequity<sup>iv</sup>

In a nation grounded in a strong belief in individualism, it remains a challenge to appreciate the full extent to which poverty and discrimination are, at their most virulent, *structural* phenomena. In other words, there’s far more to poverty than individual effort, and there’s far more to racial discrimination than individual intent. The Kirwan Institute puts it this way: “...(H)istorical legacies, individuals, structures, and institutions work interactively to distribute material and symbolic advantages and disadvantages along racial lines.”<sup>5</sup>

As a prelude to a description of the forces that work to destabilize African American families, it bears noting that African American families persist in great part because of certain cultural strengths -- such as strong kinship bonds, a strong value placed on education, a strong religious tradition, adaptable family roles,<sup>6</sup> and father involvement, even in the absence of marriage.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, evidence suggests that young African American adults value marriage no less than their counterparts from other groups.<sup>8</sup> Having the means to be perceived as “marriageable” and to achieve that goal differs significantly, however.<sup>9</sup>

**Policy, Place, and Opportunity.** Opportunity is created in significant respects by the interaction of policy and place. Throughout U.S. history, public policy and private sector practices – intentionally and not -- have produced the troubling and enduring national outcome that poverty *disproportionately* affects African Americans.<sup>v</sup> One need only go back into post-World War II policy history to see, for example, how the GI Bill – universal in its framing but actively unequal in its implementation through redlining and discriminatory real estate practices – set in motion the race-based nature of today’s residential segregation, community inequities, and inner city poverty.<sup>10</sup> William Julius Wilson points out other policies built on top of this devastating outcome:<sup>11</sup>

- Federal transportation and highway policies that shifted jobs from cities to suburbs
- Urban “renewal” that destroyed stable lower-income Black neighborhoods
- Federal fiscal policies that drastically cut aid to cities

*“The number of children living in poverty is increasing at an alarming rate. To address this growing problem, fathers and families need to get more involved. There are some unique challenges that the African American community faces in this regard and the federal government needs to take appropriate measures to address these issues.”*

Rep. James E. Clyburn

<sup>iv</sup> H.R. 2979 does not address all elements of the “bigger picture.” No single piece of legislation can. But its features for African American communities are best understood in the context of the bigger picture. Policy to address the bigger picture would need to focus on additional issues like regional equity for communities and schools, non-exclusionary zoning, affordable housing, equity in job access, equitable impact of ARRA funding in terms of contractors and end-beneficiaries, DMC implementation, and active enforcement of non-discrimination in employment, housing, and financial services.

<sup>v</sup> The fact that this document focuses specifically on African Americans does not suggest that other groups of color are not subjected to similar social forces. As Simms et.al. show, while more Hispanic families can be classified as low-income (below 200% of poverty level), low-income African American families are more likely to be poor (below 100% of poverty level). M. Simms et.al., “Racial and Ethnic Disparities Among Low Income Families,” The Urban Institute, August 2009, [http://www.urban.org/uploadedpdf/411936\\_racialandethnic.pdf](http://www.urban.org/uploadedpdf/411936_racialandethnic.pdf).

- Minimum wage policies that still render full-time family wage earners poor, and
- Regressive tax policies

To these Mincy adds regressive orders forthcoming from child support enforcement policy, whereby lower income fathers pay out a higher portion of their income than do fathers making better wages.<sup>12</sup>

The consequences of these *public policy choices* are devastating to working class urban African Americans. Their rural counterparts have not fared well either, although their policy story is one informed by heavy rural land loss through a practice known as partitioning,<sup>13</sup> and discriminatory treatment in access to USDA farm loans.<sup>14</sup>

African Americans experience the consequences of these policies today:

- **Residential location shapes opportunity.** Due to the discriminatory legacy of federal housing policy and private sector real estate and loan practices, Blacks are more likely than any other group to live in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty. One in every 10 African Americans lived in a concentrated poverty neighborhood in 1999, compared to 1 out of 100 Whites.<sup>15</sup> Of the 444 high-poverty non-metro counties in the U.S. where jobs are also difficult to find, three-fourths of these have high populations of low-income families of color.<sup>16</sup> Approximately 90% of rural Blacks live in the South, where their employment prospects are even worse than their urban counterparts.<sup>17</sup> Seventy-seven percent of all Black children whose families face poverty live in counties classified as persistently poor.<sup>18</sup>
- **Educational opportunity and human capital outcomes are place-based.** In 2006, the typical Black child went to a school where almost 60% of the student body experienced poverty (almost double the poverty exposure for a White child). Schools with very high levels of poverty concentration tend to have weaker staffs, lower achieving peer groups, problems of health and nutrition, residential instability, single-parent households, few home resources, high exposure to crime and gangs, and many other negative conditions that are not caused by the school but strongly affect the school's operations and student outcomes. Only about 3% of White students, but 40% of Black and Latino students attend schools where 70-100% of the children are poor.<sup>19</sup> Even when Black youth receive a high school diploma, they are more likely to be taught by teachers unprepared in the subjects they teach. As a result, according to the Education Trust, "By the end of high school, African American students have math and reading skills that are virtually the same as those of 8th grade White students."<sup>20</sup> In the largest urban school systems, fewer than 50% of students graduate.<sup>21</sup>
- **Job access is place-based.** In metropolitan areas, Blacks are the racial group most spatially isolated from available jobs. Across metro areas, 64% of all jobs are located over 5 miles beyond the central business district; the number increases to 71% in metro areas above 500,000 population. In either setting, over half of all jobs (or half of all African Americans) would have to relocate in order for African Americans to be geographically distributed in the same way as jobs.<sup>22</sup> Rural communities in the South with at least 30% Black population have gained fewer and lost more jobs than communities in the same region with lower Black populations.<sup>23</sup>
- **Unemployment results from the combination of disadvantages.** Global and economic forces have produced the worst economic crisis in the U.S. since the Great Depression, whose impact

has already been felt at Depression levels in African American communities.<sup>24</sup> In 2008, unemployment for Black workers (11%) remained almost double what it was for Whites (6%), a ratio unchanged in at least 35 years.<sup>25</sup> By August, 2009, the unemployment rate for Black men stood at 17%.<sup>26</sup> Since the unemployment rate does not include people who are involuntarily working part-time or have ceased looking for work because they think there are no jobs available, the situation is far worse than the unemployment numbers imply. In August 2009, only 58% percent of Black men had any employment.<sup>27</sup> As a downward trend unfolds, African American men are likely to respond to their increasingly weak employment opportunities by withdrawing from the labor market altogether. Further, discouragement from labor market participation may be experienced by the growing percentage of young African American men with criminal records which make finding work all the more daunting. Work disincentives are built into child support regulations where wages earned are not directly applied to men's family needs.<sup>28</sup> The regressive nature of child support orders makes payment all the more difficult for men with low-wage jobs, under-employment, and intermittent employment, in addition to those who are unemployed.<sup>29</sup>

- **Racial disparities in income, wealth, and poverty are the logical result of limited opportunity.** For every dollar earned by White families, Black families earn about 60 cents. The racial wealth gap is even greater than the racial income gap. The Survey of Consumer Finances supported by the Federal Reserve Board shows a widening wealth gap every time it has collected data. In 1998, the net worth of white households on average was \$100,700 higher than that of African-Americans. By 2007, this gap had increased to \$142,600.<sup>30</sup> Thirty percent of African American families have either zero or negative net worth, in contrast to 13% of White families.<sup>31</sup> This means that already vulnerable Black families have less to fall back on when tough times hit. While Blacks are most likely to have their strongest asset in their home, they and their neighborhoods have been disproportionately victimized by sub-prime lending (even after controlling for other factors that could explain lending rates) and foreclosure, which reduces the value of all housing stock in a neighborhood.<sup>32</sup>

The foregoing data produce a grim picture of the status of African Americans and their **chances for intergenerational mobility**. These data show how African Americans continue to suffer from lack of opportunities for advancement, so it follows that the poverty rate for Blacks remains three times what it is for Whites. Further, since African Americans disproportionately occupy the lower economic quintiles, they do not benefit from the large tax expenditures that accrue to those in the higher tax brackets.<sup>33</sup>

The outlook for intergenerational mobility differs for *low-income* Black youth and *low-income* White youth. Low-income Black youth are less likely than their White counterparts to receive a high school diploma (67% v. 73%), and less likely to be employed on their 24<sup>th</sup> birthday (57% v. 74%). While they are *less likely* to engage in risky behaviors, they are *just as likely* to be charged with a crime by age 24 (22% v. 21%).<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, on virtually every indicator of well-being, young African American *males* lag behind every other race and gender group in the U.S.<sup>35</sup> While human capital differentials are a key factor in the prospect for economic mobility, so, too, are community factors. Intergenerational mobility out of low-opportunity neighborhoods has proven elusive to too many African American families. Since the 1970s *a majority* of Black families has resided in the poorest quarter of neighborhoods in consecutive generations, compared to only 7% of White families.<sup>36</sup>

To this litany of structural forces are added the factors of:

- **Heightened stigmatization** by authorities of low-income urban communities of color -- which produces further inequities (e.g., police profiling, caseworker stereotyping, teachers' low expectations and differential application of school disciplinary policies). Stigmatization manifests specifically in a negative view of and stereotypes about Black fathers.<sup>37</sup>
- Policy choices around **drug control strategy** and **policing and sentencing practices** that create incarceration disparities<sup>38</sup> and neighborhoods with "million dollar blocks" – where the public spends over \$1M annually just for the incarceration of individuals and support of their family members– and to which these individuals too often return without the supports they need for successful reintegration. While African Americans constitute only 14% of drug users, they represent 35% of those arrested for drug offenses, 53% of drug convictions, and 45% of drug offenders in prison.<sup>39</sup>
- **Localized worldviews and meanings.** Many lower income African Americans develop their notions of "how the world works" within the settings and circumstances just described. The sociologist Robert Merton noted that when individuals embrace the idea of success but cannot identify customary normative ways for achieving it, they are likely to respond in one of two ways: through innovative means that may not be socially accepted, or through giving up on the hope that success is possible and ceasing to try. Either case can produce self-defeating behaviors, such as criminal activity to secure resources, or self-numbing and withdrawal through drug addiction. The extent to which individuals adopt such worldviews and meanings and shape their behavior accordingly is a policy issue in itself, but these cannot be understood or ameliorated without appreciation for the structural conditions that give rise to them.

In short, African American men encounter considerable odds as they consider preparing for and entering into marriage and family responsibilities. As the next section describes, family policy has not always been on their side, and jobs policy has not been sufficient to address the magnitude of their challenges.

## The “Bigger Picture” of Family and Jobs Policies

**Family Policy.**<sup>vi</sup> Family policy is informed by, contested within, and layered over the foregoing dynamics of poverty, racial inequities, and localized worldviews. Federal government support to families seen as the “deserving poor” began in 1935 with a focus on destitute widows with children.<sup>vii</sup> As support categories expanded, the question about who is “deserving” has underwritten every social welfare policy debate, overtly or not. That question became amplified and racialized when Blacks began to access welfare benefits in the 1960s. The real value of AFDC benefits reached its peak in the early 1970s and declined steadily thereafter, in an era when minority presence on the AFDC rolls steadily increased.<sup>40</sup>

The mid-1970s produced a watershed moment for family policy. Efforts to target noncustodial parents crystallized in 1974 with the creation of the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement. The author of the legislation was Russell Long, the same official who would later be a principal author of the Earned Income Tax Credit. While 1974 is the year when federal child support enforcement efforts got underway, it also was the year when the earnings of most less-educated workers began to decline, reducing their capacity to pay child support.<sup>41</sup>

By the 1980s and 1990s, the welfare system was under constant attack.<sup>42</sup> Public views about welfare *programs* were increasingly being formed by public views about welfare *recipients*, and the language around welfare recipients was decidedly race-coded. Terms like “urban poverty” and “underclass,” along with images like “welfare queen” or “gang member” served simultaneously to demonize African Americans and undermine public support for welfare programs for *all* low-income families.<sup>43</sup>

Public discussions around welfare “undeservedness” hinged on complementary images – that of successful African Americans who had prevailed against all odds, on the one hand, and the cautionary tale of those caught in crime, drugs, and violence on the other. Both of these images reinforced the idea that personal responsibility alone determines outcomes. Within this imagery, lower-income and out-of-work Black young men and fathers were framed as predators and “dead-beat dads.” Further, some viewed federal safety net programs as incentivizing non-marital births.

*"No one argues that there is any one model of family structure, but the elimination of government barriers to healthy relationships and healthy marriages, the promotion of cooperative parenting skills, the fostering of economic stability, and the provision of incentives to non-custodial parents to fulfill financial and emotional support responsibilities are clearly in the interests of millions of children."*

Rep. Danny K. Davis

<sup>vi</sup> “Family policy” is defined here as policy “aimed at addressing the problems families are perceived as experiencing in society and is constituted of a series of separate but interrelated policy choices that address such problems from unwed parenthood to long-term care to urban sprawl.” Zimmerman, S. (2001). *Family Policy: Constructed Solutions to Family Problems*. Sage Publications, Inc.

<sup>vii</sup> As Ron Mincy points out, the punitive nature of child support policy grows out of *state* practices dating back to the colonial era. Ronald Mincy, email to authors, October 13, 2009.



In the mid 1990s, few would debate that “welfare as we know it” needed considerable overhaul – employment must be central, and parents must step up for their children. What remained to be determined was how punitive it might be in its specifications. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), or “welfare reform,” brought fathers to the forefront in several respects: through streamlined paternity establishment, stronger child support provisions, marriage promotion, and the declared desirability of two-parent families. Its emphasis was as much about child support reform as it was about reform of the cash benefit (welfare). Both provisions got stricter. Work supports were more readily available for mothers to leave welfare than for fathers to move into work. Still, the Responsible Fatherhood movement pushed against the stereotype of “deadbeat dads” to advocate that employment support was needed for those “dead broke dads” who are without the means to pay child support.<sup>44</sup> PRWORA ended the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) entitlement program, and established the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) block grant. It put time limits on receipt of welfare, raised requirements for work, and enforced a family cap.

The subsequent decline in TANF caseloads was not equated with a decline in poverty or need. While the cash welfare caseload declined by two-thirds from 1994 to 2008, the share of poor children receiving TANF cash welfare payments plummeted from over 60% before welfare reform to 23% by 2007.<sup>45</sup> In other words, there were more poor children who were *not* receiving TANF than was the case prior to reform. Moreover, two to three years after leaving welfare, 50- 70% of leavers continued to earn incomes below the poverty level.<sup>46</sup> Further, since paternity establishment was a hallmark of the 1996 reforms, more Black (and other low-income) fathers were being drawn into the child support enforcement system. But because their earnings had been declining since the mid 1970’s, they had limited capacity to pay.<sup>47</sup>

Traditionally, public policies often ignored or discouraged men’s direct participation with their families.<sup>48</sup> Welfare and child support policies, combined with poor job prospects and low levels of human capital, left many men feeling alienated from their fatherly roles.<sup>49</sup> Most family policy was mother- and child-focused. In the case of welfare and child support, the State had often filled the provider role for unwed mothers through temporary cash assistance and child support collection and enforcement. These systems presumed a father’s absence and then functioned in ways that discouraged or penalized fathers’ visibility and engagement. A focus on fathers was limited to paternity establishment and child support payment to the child support agency rather than directly to the family.<sup>50</sup>

Alongside the foregoing forces, by the late 1980s, advocacy for fathers had begun to emerge. The Responsible Fatherhood movement, whose leadership included African American men, was the result of this advocacy. The bipartisan group within the Responsible Fatherhood movement forged a common ground agreement around **mutual and interlocking responsibility**. The agreement was that men be required, encouraged, and enabled to accept the responsibility to contribute to the social, emotional, and economic well-being of their children, regardless of whether those fathers lived in the same home as the children.<sup>51</sup> The first step in that process is paternity declaration, after which they agreed that men should receive the services and supports needed to be successful fathers. Those supports crystallized around jobs, relational skills, fathering skills, and child support intermediation.

As its own infrastructure and capacity grew, the Responsible Fatherhood movement was instrumental in shifting the policy climate. Its research-based advocacy succeeded in reshaping images of fathers from “deadbeat dads” to the growing realization that too many dads are “dead broke” and that most fathers, even when they don’t live with their children, want to be engaged.<sup>52</sup> Armed with research documenting

the devastating effects on children from father absence, policy-makers increasingly embraced actions that would address the barriers men face to helping their children do well. Also, advocates pointed to a growing body of research showing the link between father absence and the nation's seemingly most intractable social problems — poverty, crime, and drug abuse. Importantly, at this critical time research began to re-conceptualize the relationship between Black fathers and their children through an appreciation of father's desire for engagement and recognition of the needs of "fragile families."<sup>53</sup>

By the time of TANF reauthorization in 2006, the impact of the Responsible Fatherhood movement was more evident. It included \$150 million for each of five years (FY2006 through FY2010) for the promotion and support of responsible fatherhood and healthy marriage. The language and funding reflected the belief and growing bipartisan buy-in that responsible, involved fathering occurs most often within the context of marriage, and that marriage is the best family configuration for children.<sup>54</sup>

The notion of "mutual responsibility" that guides the Responsible Fatherhood movement calls for government to promote policies that affirm and support parents' capacity to do their family work well. Bipartisan interest in, and support for, Responsible Fatherhood at the **federal level** can be traced through the five most recent Presidential administrations:

- ✓ In the **Reagan** administration, fathers received policy attention in the 1988 Family Support Act, which linked employment and training services to child support obligations, launched national demonstrations to test policy and practice, and emphasized paternity establishment.
- ✓ Under **President George H.W. Bush**, the USDHHS created the Minority Male Initiative, providing grants to "address the complex set of issues that leave too many minority youth vulnerable to problems like violence, alcohol and drug use, sexually transmitted diseases, homelessness, teen-age parenthood, failure to finish school or unemployment."<sup>55</sup>
- ✓ **President Clinton** issued an Executive Memorandum to all federal agencies to include fathers in their work. The USDHHS responded by creating the Fatherhood Initiative. As already noted, the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) sought to strengthen federal and state child support enforcement programs.
- ✓ In the administration of **President George W. Bush**, the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 included \$150M for fatherhood, parenting, and healthy marriage programs from 2006-2010.
- ✓ **President Barack Obama** created the White House Task Force for Fatherhood and Healthy Families, which is conducting regional town forums around the country to highlight what dads, organizations and communities are doing to address the challenges fathers and families face.

In addition, bipartisan Task Forces on Responsible Fatherhood work in the Senate and House ensure that fatherhood issues remain on the legislative agenda.

Bipartisan support for the work of Responsible Fatherhood can be found at the state level, too. By 1999, 98% of states had policy or programs to strengthen fathers as economic providers, and 37 states had initiatives to help prevent unwanted or unplanned early fatherhood. At least 36 states have revised their TANF eligibility rules to promote responsible fatherhood. Some of the most innovative state child support programs in the country came out of the cross fertilization provided by responsible fatherhood practitioners, who left the non-profit field to go into child support enforcement.<sup>56</sup> A growing number of corrections institutions and at least 40% of all Head Start programs have developed fatherhood programs as components of their work. Almost 100 local foundations have made Responsible

Fatherhood part of their work because they recognize that their missions will not be accomplished without the active and constructive engagement of fathers.

In short, family policy has more recently sought to engage fathers and support them in their roles. Leadership has occurred at both federal and state levels for funding and regulatory change. Much has already been learned from completed demonstration projects, including the significant employment barriers faced by low-income non-custodial fathers: limited educations and employment histories, low wages from work, and histories of incarceration.<sup>57</sup> Our nation's jobs policy is a critical companion to its family policy when mapping the supports needed for family well-being.

**Jobs Policy.** While the federal government has over 40 programs that provide some funding for employment and training, still the U.S. is near the bottom of industrialized nations in spending on "active labor market policy."<sup>58</sup> Low-income men have become increasingly disconnected from school and work—and increasingly poor<sup>59</sup>. The picture for young, less-educated Black males is particularly bleak, with only about half between the ages of 16 and 24 working at all (See Figure 2) and a lack of wage growth for those who are working. Even those connected to the workforce saw their hourly wages decline from an average of \$8.73 per hour in 1979 to \$7.22 per hour in 1989<sup>60</sup>. A large proportion of disconnected low-income men are noncustodial fathers. The workforce trends are troubling beyond their impact on individuals; the earnings of non-custodial fathers are correlated with the ability to pay child support and the amount of child support payment.

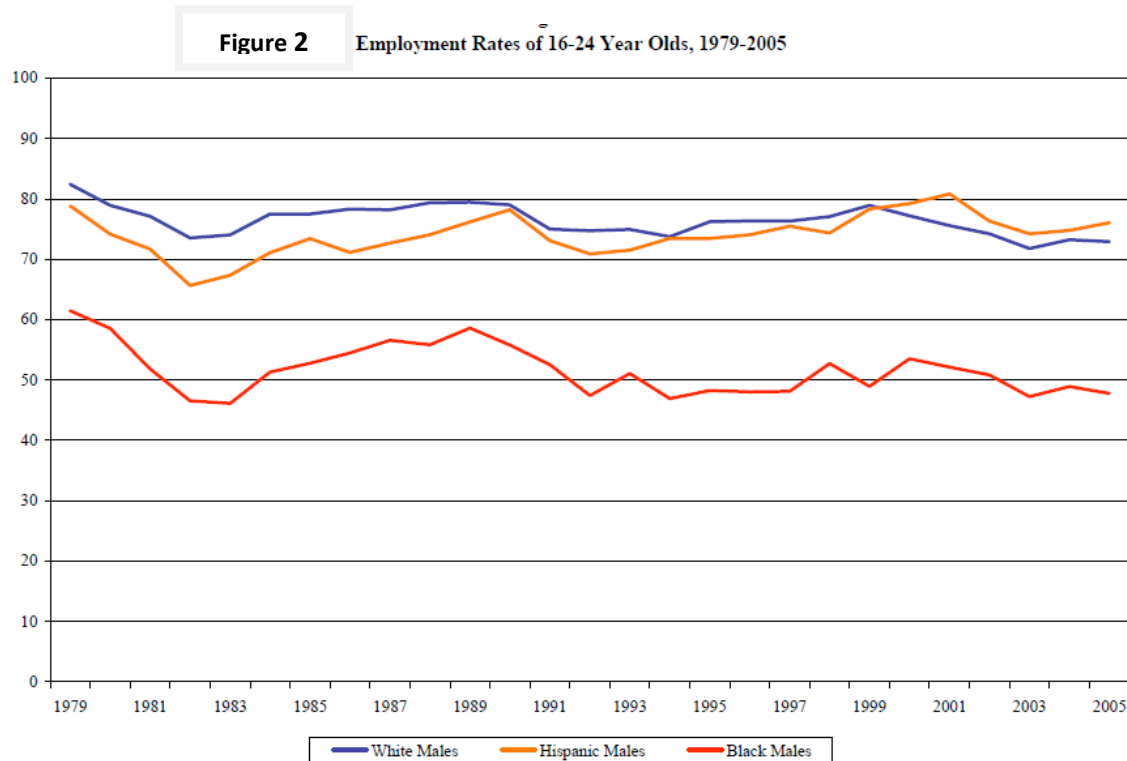
How best to connect detached fathers to the workforce so they can begin to build stable lives for themselves and help support their children is a complex policy issue. Few programs have been evaluated; those that have, have not achieved their desired levels of effectiveness.<sup>61</sup> For example, the impacts of JTPA programs for young males were not statistically significant.<sup>62</sup> In addition, the Parents Fair Share demonstration project provided evidence of the difficulty and complexity of improving earnings and labor market outcomes for low income men, with only the "least employable" among the target group showing measurable benefit from the services.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, racial disparities in employment among young men persist, even in robust labor markets.

In recognition of the fact that lower-income men lack job skills, education and training programs have been created, including subsidized work, basic education (short term), job training and job search assistance. The primary legislation through which Congress now funds labor market supports, including job training, is the Workforce Investment Act (WIA). WIA has experienced declines in funding almost every year since its inception in 1998. As a result, it is underfunded, overstretched, and provides a fragmented experience for users.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, key public workforce programs have a decidedly

*"Our children need strong families to nurture and prepare them for life's challenges. Government can, and should, play a role in supporting families, helping to create a stable environment that instills hope, values and responsibility in children. This report suggests that, all too often, African American families struggle to obtain a foundation of support often found in other communities. For the future of our great nation, we must reaffirm our commitment to strengthen our health care and educational systems, as well as our safety-net programs to support all families and children."*

Rep. Charles B. Rangel

mixed record of success in assisting *minority* workers. Citing “race-indifference” as contributing to these mixed results, Conrad calls for performance measures that take into account the different levels of “employability” of workers, as well as a strategy to deal with racial discrimination in service provision and employer behaviors.<sup>65</sup>



Source: Current Population Surveys, Outgoing Rotation Groups, 1979-2005.  
 Note: The samples include only those not enrolled in school and with a high school diploma or less.

Access first to JTPA and then to WIA programs is limited. Data from the 1998 National Survey of American Families shows that only 2-3% percent of young, Black, less-educated non-custodial fathers received job training or job search assistance<sup>66</sup>. Additionally, young Black males were the least likely among participants to take part in on-the-job-training programs, which research suggests is correlated with better employment outcomes<sup>67</sup>. These programs typically involve employers collaborating with community colleges or programs funded under WIA to prepare workers for specific available jobs. While many of these collaborative programs look promising, they are still being evaluated.<sup>68</sup>

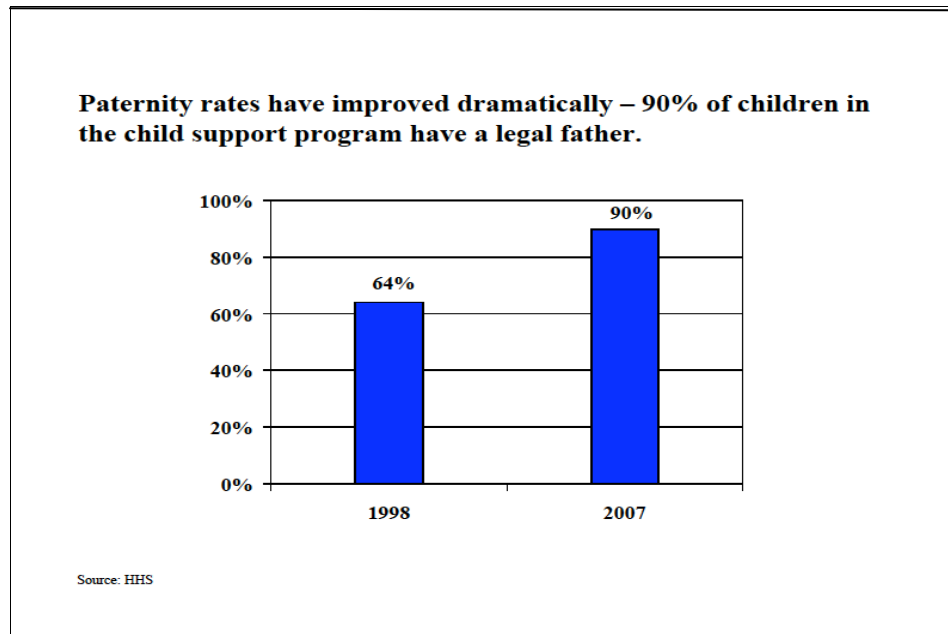
Some economists recommend raising the minimum wage and/or making work pay by increasing the EITC--particularly for non-custodial fathers. These strategies will surely benefit low-income minority males already in the job market or those more easily placed there. However, the barriers faced by a large proportion of men who are less educated and disconnected from the labor force for extended periods of time still need to be addressed. Promising recommendations for these men include preparing and matching them with high wage blue-collar vacancies (e.g., mechanics, electricians) and focusing re-entry work to have men connected to job opportunities within days of being released from prison.<sup>69</sup>

Despite the challenges and shortcomings of family and jobs policies, evidence exists that when mutual responsibility is at work – when federal and state governments do their parts and fathers do theirs – positive results are indeed possible. When components of family and jobs supports are paired with responsible fatherhood programming, the potential for success is multiplied. The challenge is to scale these collaborations so that more families and communities are better off and our nation is stronger as a result.

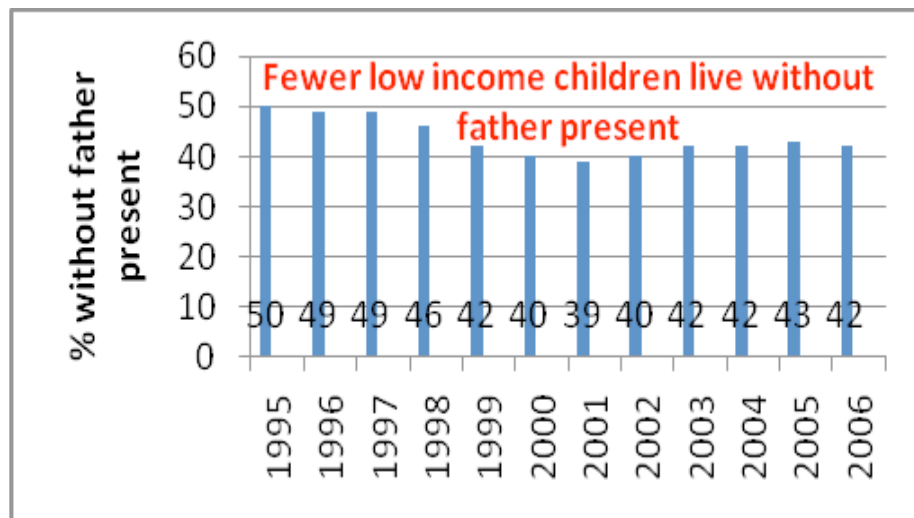
### Evidence that Mutual Responsibility Works

Investing in fathers pays off for families, as Figures 3, 4, and 5 show. Today, more fathers declare paternity,<sup>70</sup> more live with their children,<sup>71</sup> and more non-custodial men pay child support<sup>72</sup> than they did in the mid-1990s. As a result, over a ten year period child support collections doubled, from less than \$11 billion in 1995 to about \$22 billion in 2004.

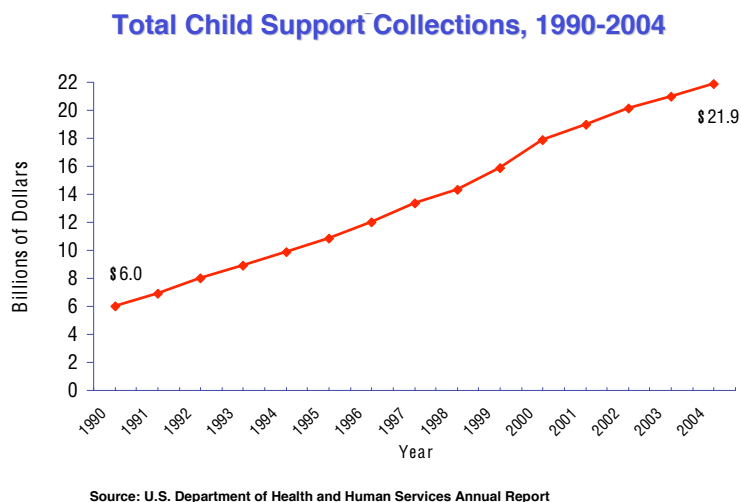
**Figure 3.** More Fathers Declare Paternity



**Figure 4.** More fathers live with their children.



**Figure 5.** Child support collections have risen.



Investing in fathers pays off for taxpayers, too, in both the short and long-term:

- Funding spent on federal child support collection is **cost-effective**, especially when it addresses fathers' particular circumstances and passes payments through to the family. The child support program *collects \$4.73 in support payments for families for every public dollar spent.*<sup>73</sup>
- An emerging lesson is that investments in **promoting father presence** can reduce the costs of father absence. One conservative estimate is that father absence costs taxpayers \$100 billion per year in direct services and supports for father-absent households.<sup>74</sup>
- Fathers' presence in children's lives **improves their chances** to attain higher levels of education and earn more as adults, thereby increasing their potential contribution to income, property, and sales taxes and increasing the likelihood that they will not need additional financial support as adults.

What research and demonstration projects have taught policymakers is that **punitive policies and regulations do not work**. They are premised on the belief that men do not want to do their part. Instead, the Fragile Families research<sup>75</sup> has demonstrated that most fathers want to do well for their children. Rates of visitation among non-custodial fathers are higher than expected.<sup>76</sup> But many fathers do not yet have the capacity to fulfill their own aspirations as fathers. Further, most mothers want the father to be involved in raising the child.

Innovations within some state child support agencies have improved fathers' abilities to meet their financial responsibilities – programs like GED completion, job training, child support intermediation, and more realistic payment provisions. And fatherhood programs that focus on vocational planning, employment placement, and fathering and co-parenting skills development show significantly better outcomes for men, their children, and the relationship with the mother when compared with those who do not participate.<sup>77</sup> Further, the healthy relationship and marriage programs advanced under TANF reauthorization have adapted programs and created new curricula that specifically address the needs and circumstances of low-income and racially/ethnically diverse populations. The delivery and impact of these services are still being evaluated. What is already known is that low-income women and men

have strongly endorsed the utility of and need for such programs in their communities. In addition to gaining relationships skills and often, wrap-around services, participants form bonds with other couples in the group and have begun to create social support networks of like-minded peers who endorse models of healthy parental relationships and hold each other accountable for behaving accordingly.<sup>78</sup>

In short, what evidence has shown us is that:

- Most parents want to be successful at and involved in raising their children, no matter their income level, race or marital status.
- A focus on mutual responsibility between parents and policy makers offers the biggest payoff for children, families, communities, and taxpayers.
- Positive change occurs from good policy that is built on evidence of what works.
- There is still much left to do.

The next section looks more closely at how poverty, racial inequities, and policy impact Black fathers and family formation.



## Status of Black Fathers and Family Formation

One enduring national expectation is that the next generation should be able to stand on the shoulders of those who came before them. Those beliefs and aspirations have given this country its success and maintained its hope and promise generation after generation. They are built on the foundation of strong families and communities. Evidence suggests that children do well when their parents do well, and that parents' work is easier when they live in opportunity-rich communities.

In the midst of changing family structures, shifting social norms, and tough economic times that make a growing number of families vulnerable, doing right by our children remains a bedrock principle. It is a principle governed by the notion of **mutual and interlocking responsibility** — parents doing their part, and the government promoting policies that affirm and support parents' capacity to do their family work well.

It is reasonable that the agreement to mutual and interlocking responsibility would include the following:

- All children should have the love, care, emotional, and financial support of both parents, regardless of their residential or marital status. Fathers — who play key roles in child development and family economic success -- help to create strong families, and strong families lead to good outcomes for children.<sup>viii</sup>
- Fathers should take personal responsibility for their children and have the necessary resources to fulfill their *parenting* roles as nurturers. For this to happen, fathers must acknowledge paternity, develop effective fathering and relationship skills, and find support for their family roles in public policies.
- Fathers should take personal responsibility for their children and have the necessary resources to fulfill their *provider* roles. For this to happen, fathers must have access to jobs with decent income and benefits and find support for this role in public policies.
- Policies and programs should affirm and promote responsible fatherhood. Strengthening fathers promotes strong family values and long-term cost-savings by enhancing family self-sufficiency and community well-being.

Put differently, optimal policy builds and reinforces fathers' work attachment, family attachment, and the knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors necessary for these to be attained and sustained.

**The Importance of Fathers.** Few issues in public life find greater agreement across the population than our recognition of the importance of fathers for child and family well-being. In one poll, 97% of respondents said that fathers were just as important as mothers in proper child development. And a national survey found that 96% of respondents agreed that parents should share equally in the caretaking of children.<sup>79</sup> Public opinion in this case is highly aligned with what research tells us about father presence and father absence. Here's a snapshot of data reinforced by a host of studies.

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<sup>viii</sup> Mothers, of course, make equally essential contributions to families. Although this document focuses on fathers specifically, nothing in it should be interpreted to downplay the essential contributions of women and mothers.

Children are better off when their fathers are actively engaged in their lives:

- Fathers' love, care, and emotional support are positively linked to good social, emotional, and cognitive development in their children; their children's academic achievement; lower rates of risky behaviors and contact with the juvenile justice system; pro-social behavior; emotional health; and healthy self-esteem.<sup>80</sup>
- Fathers' reliable economic contributions improve the chances that children will grow up in higher-opportunity neighborhoods, avoid material hardship, and avoid being homeless.
- Children with involved fathers have positive models for their own relationships and eventual parenting and are more likely to develop into responsible young adults.

Families are better off when fathers fulfill their responsibilities:

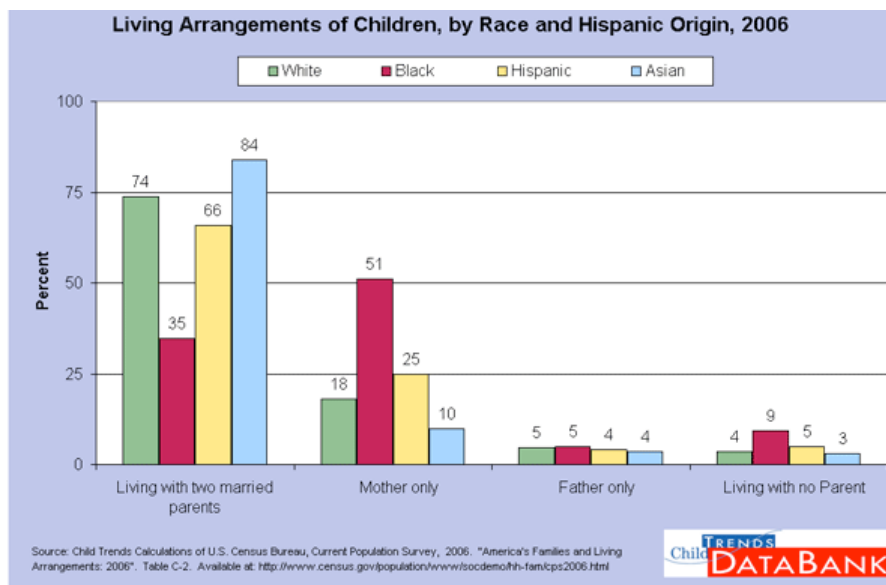
- A father's involvement in child rearing can have a positive impact on his relationship with the mother, which in turn positively affects the child. Reciprocally, when a respectful relationship exists between a father and a mother, the father is more likely to be actively involved in his child's life.
- When fathers are responsible, contributing parents, they are more likely to view themselves -- and to be viewed by mothers -- as viable marriage partners.

Communities are better off when policies and programs support responsible fathering:

- Fathers who receive services like job training and placement are better positioned to succeed economically and contribute to their families and communities.
- Involved fathers are less likely to come into contact with the criminal justice system. Conversely, fathers released from prison are less likely to experience recidivism if their family relationships were maintained during incarceration.
- Men who live with their children are more involved in community activities and service organizations and are less likely to engage in risky, unhealthy or anti-social behavior, providing positive role models for their own and other children in the community.

Section 1 described the array of barriers facing Black men in pursuit of achieving successful outcomes in family formation and fathering. These barriers are reflected in the snapshot of children's living arrangements. By 2008, fully 30% of all children in the U.S. lived with only one or neither of their parents. The institution of marriage is not now as robust as it once was for any group. But this overall statistic clouds dramatic variations in family arrangements by race/ethnicity. Only 35% of African American children live with two married parents (Figure 6).<sup>81</sup> Still, 50% of children have contact with their fathers.<sup>82</sup>

**Figure 6. Child Living Arrangements by Race**



A father's absence from the home does not mean, however, that he is not engaged in his child's life or in a relationship with the mother. Rather, research shows that the picture is far more complex. For example, a careful look upends some key myths about "fragile families" – unmarried, low-income parents who intend to raise their child together:<sup>ix</sup>

- **Myth 1: Non-marital births are the product of casual relations.** The Fragile Families data revealed that more than half of all non-marital births occur to cohabiting mothers and fathers and another 31% occur to parents who are romantically involved, but not residing together.<sup>83</sup>
- **Myth 2: Unwed fathers don't care about their children.** Among Fragile Families couples, over 95% of interviewed fathers intend to be actively involved with their children at the time of their birth, and 80% of the fathers had been or were planning to financially contribute to the rearing of the child. Like their married counterparts, Fragile Families fathers and mothers strongly endorse a model of fatherhood that includes economic and emotional support of their children, as well as frequent, direct contact.<sup>84</sup>
- **Myth 3: Unwed parents are apathetic to marriage.** The large majority of both mothers and fathers in fragile families highly value marriage, intend to marry, and think that marriage is the best environment in which to raise children. However, at the one year follow-up, only 11% of romantically involved couples had married and approximately one-third had ended their romantic relationships.<sup>85</sup>
- **Myth 4: Black men are less likely to be involved fathers.** The Fragile Families data show that Black fathers are *more* involved with their children than are White or Hispanic fathers. This may be due to

<sup>ix</sup> The "Fragile Families and Child wellbeing Study" is a collaborative endeavor by the Center for Research on Child Wellbeing (CRCW) at Princeton University and the Social Indicators Survey Center (SIS Center) at Columbia University. Baseline data collection started in 1998.

cultural differences in parenting styles and a focus in Black communities on “collective forms of obligation.”<sup>86</sup>

In addition to dispelling myths, descriptive findings of fragile families show that they face significant obstacles to successful, lasting unions and effective parenting practices.<sup>87</sup> Unwed fathers are a particularly disadvantaged group. The Fragile Families data show that 24% did not graduate from high school, 38% have been incarcerated, and less than 5% graduated from college. They are less likely than other fathers to be employed.

**Fathers and Financial Support for Their Children.** Low-income men, particularly men of color, have felt the effects of an overall 20 year trend in increased unemployment and soaring rates of incarceration.<sup>88</sup> As already noted, less than half of young African American males are connected to employment. A reduction of male breadwinners in Black communities has had profound place-based effects on families and overall community well-being, as does the loss of African American men to incarceration.<sup>89</sup>

Four kinds of policy foci are relevant to fathers and financial support: (1) job training, (2) wage supports (EITC), (3) welfare regulations, and (4) child support enforcement. Policy in these areas has not always been generous to fathers and their families or effective in achieving its intended results.

**1. Job training.** Men need financial stability as a platform for being successful fathers. Unmarried, low-income fathers are more likely to be directly and financially involved with their children when they have higher levels of education and are employed.<sup>90</sup>

Like other opportunities, financial stability is highly connected to where people live — in this case, good schools for adequate preparation, and high opportunity communities for access to jobs. Yet, as documented earlier, men are not equally situated in terms of these.

Examples of programs that show measurable success in training and employment include aspects of the Parents’ Fair Share (PFS) demonstration, Young Dads in New York City, STRIVE Baltimore, and the Georgia Fatherhood Program. PFS increased earnings among men who were characterized as “less employable” (i.e., those without a high school diploma and with little recent work experience).<sup>91</sup> Young Dads programming for fathers demonstrated that program participants were more likely than non-participants to develop vocational plans and obtain employment.<sup>92</sup> Using a combination of job training, placement services, case management, and job retention and advancement strategies, the Center for Urban Families places the majority of its program participants in jobs within three weeks where the average hourly starting wage for placements is \$8.36 per hour—well above the current federal minimum wage. Program participants include men with criminal convictions, and with limited educational credentials.<sup>93</sup>

*“Our government spends \$100 billion a year to deal with the fallout of absent fathers. The government can’t pass a law to make men good dads, but we can support local programs that specialize in job training, career counseling and financial literacy to help those men who embrace their parental responsibility and are trying to earn a livable wage to do right by their kids.”*

Senator Evan Bayh

Georgia's statewide comprehensive program for low-income noncustodial fathers has more than doubled fathers' employment rates, increased the availability of health benefits for their children, and enabled them to pay at least 50% of their child support obligation.<sup>94</sup>

**2. EITC.** As the most important anti-poverty tool currently available, the Earned Income Tax Credit began in 1975 (P.L. 94-12) as a temporary program to return a portion of the Social Security tax paid by lower income taxpayers. It was made permanent in 1978. In 2005, the EITC lifted 5 million people out of poverty, including 2.6 million children. Without the EITC, the poverty rate among children would have been nearly one-fourth higher.<sup>95</sup> Under current law, even when noncustodial fathers pay child support, they are considered childless for tax purposes, which makes them eligible for only a small tax benefit. Expansion of a Childless Worker's EITC or creation of a Non-Custodial Parent EITC would provide fathers with greater income for their families. Yet, because both would require full child support payment for a given tax year, this requirement may mean that those most in need will be ineligible to receive it.<sup>96</sup> Further, because the EITC rewards work by reducing the taxes that low-wage workers pay on their earnings and refunds a portion of taxes for those with very low wage, only people who work receive the benefits. So job training, placement and job retention are essential if African American men are to benefit from EITC.

**3. Welfare regulations.** Under AFDC, two-parent families (whether married or unmarried) were eligible for assistance only if they met strict eligibility requirements. These requirements created a barrier for some needy parents to marry or live together. The rules were especially likely to penalize very young parents who had little or no work experience and families where one parent worked regularly for low wages, but remained financially needy. In addition, an inaccurate but prevailing belief in many low-income communities was that only single parents can receive cash assistance, which effectively created another barrier to father participation with children and family engagement. With the passage of PRWORA, states were given considerable flexibility in the design of their state TANF programs, including the freedom to eliminate special rules that restricted benefits for two-parents. Today 36 states base TANF eligibility for two-parent families solely on their financial circumstances, eliminating the earlier requirements, and they no longer limit receipt of assistance to families in which a parent is incapacitated or unemployed.<sup>97</sup>

**4. Child support enforcement.** Under PRWORA, to be eligible to receive public assistance, mothers are required to cooperate with state officials in identifying and legally pursuing nonresident fathers for child support collection by assigning their child support rights to the state. These changes have resulted in significant increases in child support collections.<sup>98</sup> Because never-married mothers are the least likely to receive child support, PRWORA made paternity establishment and child support enforcement more stringent among the states by allowing them to intercept lottery winnings, tax returns, etc. of noncustodial parents in arrearages, as well as use incarceration as a tactic to hold fathers economically accountable (PRWORA, PL 104-193, Title III, Sec. 300). One problem with this tactic is that fathers cannot pay child support or interact optimally with their children if they are incarcerated.

The expectation from PRWORA's stronger paternity and child support requirements was that these would result in increased child support payments and father involvement.<sup>99</sup> This expectation plays out ***when the features of child support enforcement are family-friendly.*** Here's what research has found:

- The Parents' Fair Share (PFS) demonstration revealed that increased child support led to increased father visitation in families where the visitation was low.<sup>100</sup> Yet it also led to increased child-focused conflicts between the mothers and fathers.<sup>101</sup> However, the Wisconsin W-2 Demonstration Project found that parental conflict was reduced by its child support pass-through<sup>x</sup> when it appreciably lessened the mothers' economic burden.<sup>102</sup> This same study found that fathers' child support payments and paternity establishment increased with the pass-through when it was disregarded in the calculation of the means test. Moreover, the total costs to the State of the pass-through and disregard of child support were fully offset by the increased payments of fathers and decreased public assistance use by families.
- Fragile Families data showed that states with stricter child support enforcement policies (e.g., how quickly states enact automatic wage withholding) produce lower levels of father involvement.<sup>103</sup> Often men want to be involved fathers, but poor earnings capability drives them away from their children.<sup>104</sup> Evaluations of state child support enforcement policies have shown that supportive child support enforcement policies, rather than coercive ones, have a positive impact on father involvement.<sup>105</sup> Regressive child support order policies lead to non-compliance with child support.<sup>106</sup>
- Data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Survey of Income and Program Participation showed that fathers with voluntary, court ratified child support agreements are more likely to have greater contact with their children and pay larger amounts of support.<sup>107</sup> Researchers suggest moving from a judicial process in which the mother/State sues the father for child support, to an administrative process that is mediated and based on bargaining and mutual agreement. The mediation removes the adversarial nature of a court proceeding and also allows the parents to communicate constructively about child support. Some researchers and advocates have recommended ending the State assignment of child support altogether in the interest of custodial mothers at risk of domestic violence, as research has found that a state's aggressive pursuit of child support can engender violence against mothers.<sup>108</sup>

Clearly, family policies related to financial support have effects that go well beyond finances.

**Healthy Co-parental Relationships and Marriage.** On average, children fare best when raised by both biological parents with a healthy married relationship. In the absence of such a scenario, family policy has attempted to provide support for the relationship between a child's parents, or the co-parental relationship, which may or may not lead to marriage.

Family systems theory recognizes that the relationship between parents—the alliance, cooperation, and level of interdependence, or lack thereof—significantly affects father involvement and child outcomes.<sup>109</sup> Family subsystems appear to have a "spillover" effect into other family subsystems and individual functioning. Consistent with the "spillover" hypothesis, one would expect to find that high quality co-parental relationships result in stronger father-child involvement. Conversely, when the co-

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<sup>x</sup> A child support pass-through program is a state plan for the distribution of child support collections. Under TANF, states may give all of the child support to the family, divide the money between the family and the state, or keep the entire state share.

parental relationship is poor, the feelings and behaviors produced in this relationship can "spill over" and negatively affect parenting roles.

Effectively functioning co-parental relationships are fundamental, regardless of a family's structure, but may operate differently depending on that structure.<sup>110</sup> Like married and divorced families, father involvement in unwed or fragile families is also particularly sensitive to the supportive and cooperative dimensions of co-parenting. Co-parenting in never-married families can be particularly problematic because parents must define their parental roles and responsibilities outside of the cultural norms marriage provides and outside of the basic legal structure divorce provides. As such, co-parenting in fragile families is often seen as a voluntary, rather than expected act—particularly on the part of nonresident fathers.<sup>111</sup>

Helping men develop their roles as caregivers and supportive and cooperative partners or co-parents can be beneficial to men, women and children. PRWORA is perhaps the most prominent policy to do this, as it had as one of its goals to explicitly promote marriage, as mentioned earlier. The 2006 reauthorization of TANF dedicated \$150 million over five years for a grant program to promote and support responsible fatherhood and healthy marriage. The USDHHS Administration for Children and Families (ACF) had already found creative ways to fund marriage promotion and Responsible Fatherhood activities. Since 2002, ACF has used several existing funding vehicles within the agency to finance a number of marriage-related demonstration grants, research, and evaluation projects, which are underway.

The melding of fatherhood policy with marriage promotion has many implications for fathers and families. Most of the funded marriage promotion activities include helping couples build relationship skills, primarily focusing on effective communication, cooperative parenting, and conflict resolution. Such program activities—if they are effective—could ultimately help produce positive outcomes for children. The implication is that even for parents who cannot, or choose not to marry, effectively functioning co-parental systems are necessary and should be supported. States that remove their special two-parent eligibility requirements under TANF could increase the likelihood of father involvement and perhaps the possibility that the parents will reside together. Changing this TANF requirement in the remaining 15 states that have not done so is a fairly straightforward, cost-effective strategy to support two-parent families and father involvement. Providing a pass-through and disregard of fathers' child support payments has been shown to benefit mothers and children, increase child support payments, and be more cost effective for states than retaining the funds.

Further, one need only talk to the participants from the various relationship strengthening programs to find that they embrace them. The fact that low-income couples have not previously had access to these types of educational and enriching programs has only served as another structural barrier in the formation of healthy lasting unions.

**Fathers and Parenting Skills.** While increased financial support does lead to better outcomes for children,<sup>112</sup> fathers' direct involvement with their children and the mothers of their children matters too. Fathers have been found to have less child rearing knowledge than mothers because, generally, males have less exposure to activities that prepare them for parenthood. Fathers weigh, integrate, and assess their capabilities, and then behave accordingly. If their capabilities change, their self-efficacy can change as well. Encouraging findings from fatherhood intervention studies support this premise. Fathers who participate in skill-oriented parenting training do increase their involvement and are capable of acquiring these skills and becoming successful parents.<sup>113</sup> Both mother and father

participants in the Minnesota Early Learning Design co-parenting and childbirth curricula reported that fathers improved their co-parenting.<sup>114</sup>

**The Extraordinary Challenge of Incarcerated Fathers.** Most men agree that being a father is a strong social identity.<sup>115</sup> But, depending on fathers' circumstances, this is easier said than done. African American fathers disproportionately face the issue of incarceration, which especially challenges the achievement of the kinds of relationships that children need to be successful and that fathers need to feel that they've done their job well.

The United States incarcerates its citizens at a rate higher than any country in the world. More than 2.3 million Americans are in state and federal prisons. However, crime and incarceration do not impact all neighborhoods equally, nor do the challenges of re-entry. For African Americans, the numbers reflect a more daunting situation. One in fifteen African American males over 18 is behind bars as opposed to one out of 36 for Latinos and one out of 106 for white males.<sup>116</sup> In addition, approximately 650,000 men and women are released from state and federal prison annually. This number does not include those who come home from city and county jails. If current trends continue, the chilling extrapolation is that one in three Black males born today can expect to spend time in prison during his lifetime.<sup>117</sup> These men are disproportionately removed from lower income, segregated and disinvested communities, where they will eventually return – too often without the skills they need to become successful husbands, fathers, neighbors and wage earners. Their ongoing struggles render already vulnerable communities further challenged.

The most recent Bureau of Justice Statistics data show that in 2007 there were over 800,000 parents incarcerated in US prisons. This is a 79% increase since 1991.<sup>118</sup> Among incarcerated parents, 92% are fathers.<sup>119</sup> On any given day, 2.3 million children have a parent who is incarcerated. Approximately 10 million children in the US are affected by current or past parental involvement with the criminal justice system.<sup>120</sup> Nearly half of all incarcerated fathers report living with their children before going to prison. Even when these fathers were not residing with their children, they often contributed income, child care, and social support to their families.<sup>121</sup>

Fathering while in prison is not impossible, but incarcerated men face considerable obstacles. About six in ten incarcerated fathers have some kind of monthly contact with their children, but a majority does not receive visits from their children throughout the time they are locked up. Family connection and support are key predictors of the father's ability to reenter the community once his time is served and not return to prison again. Because many men in prison report high rates of illegal drug use, violence and mental illness prior to their incarceration, many may not really know how to be good parents, yet, now are willing to devote time to this pursuit. Prison-based parenting education and fatherhood programs can fill this gap. However, prison-based parenting programs, while available in a growing number of institutions, are still not widely offered in men's prisons. Only 11 percent of fathers in state prisons report ever participating in a parenting or fatherhood class.<sup>122</sup>

Once released, former prisoners face a magnification of the structural barriers described earlier in this document. Upon release, they have little money, too often do not have social supports, and experience difficult barriers to housing and employment that do not affect other low-income people. For example:

- ⇒ Employment – Considered the key to rehabilitation, yet in many states legal prohibitions exist against former prisoner participation in certain occupations.



- ⇒ Housing - Federal law has placed restrictions on the ability of people returning from prison to utilize Section 8 and public housing and has authorized public housing agencies to impose substantially more restrictions.
- ⇒ Education – Under the 1998 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act of 1965, students who have prior convictions for possession or sale of controlled substances cannot obtain Pell grants or student loans. In 2001, more than 43,000 college students faced possible denials of federal student aid as a result of the ban. Although the ban was intended to apply solely to students already receiving federal aid when convicted, the federal Department of Education applied the ban more broadly to students having convictions before they went to college.
- ⇒ Public Benefits – The 1996 welfare reform law imposed a lifetime ban on TANF and Food Stamp benefits for people with felony drug convictions for conduct after August 22, 1996—regardless of their circumstances or subsequent efforts at rehabilitation— unless their state affirmatively passes legislation to opt out of the ban. Although 31 states have modified or eliminated the ban, it remains in effect for many people returning home.
- ⇒ Child Support Debt: When parents go to prison, their child support orders are not automatically suspended or reduced in most states. In some states, incarceration is considered “voluntary unemployment,” which does not justify reduction. Debt mounts, often building to thousands of dollars in arrears that low-wage ex-prisoners will likely never be able to pay off. In Maryland , for example, 100% of the currently imprisoned caseload and 97% of the formerly imprisoned obligors owed arrears. The average amount owed by imprisoned obligors was \$22,048 (with half owing more than \$15,931 in arrearages). The average amount of child support debt for formerly incarcerated obligors with a current order was \$17,255 (with half owing more than \$11,554). In Baltimore City, Maryland’s most concentrated region of urban poverty, 41% of all child support arrears were owed by persons who are or have been in prison. For all of Maryland it was 25%.<sup>123</sup>
- ⇒ An unintended consequence of the Adoption and Safe Families Act is that in many states, parental rights are terminated based on parents’ convictions for crimes not directly related to their ability to care for their children, without a case-by-case consideration of individual circumstances.

**Responsible Policy and Practice Work for Fathers and Families.** As Section 1 documented, investing in fathers has paid off in terms of more fathers declaring paternity, more fathers living with their children, and more fathers paying child support when enforcement is family-supportive. Two decades of Responsible Fatherhood programs offer a closer look at what works and what still needs emphasis in programmatic interventions. Among the lessons learned are these:

- **Optimal intervention points.** With fragile families, the “magic moment” of the birth of the child and the “daddy moment” in the two to three years immediately thereafter when men are most engaged with their children are the most productive times to offer services and supports that can enable the family to have lasting attachment and the father to develop improved employment skills with prospects for more stable work and better income. Given this economically challenged group of fathers, offering incentives for participation in fatherhood programs has proven to be an effective tool for program completion.<sup>124</sup> .

- **Co-location of fatherhood supports.** The recognition that — at minimum — effective fathers need financial stability, good relationship skills, and positive parenting skills has led to the development of more comprehensive supports and services that fathers can access in single trusted locations that are culturally sensitive to the fathers and families they serve.
- Alliance with **domestic violence** and **healthy marriage** practitioners. Healthy Marriage and co-parenting programs have demonstrated the value of bringing mothers AND fathers into the picture to address their concerns and create shared expectations around fathering, co-parenting, conflict resolution and aspirations for marriage. Domestic violence protocols and resources have been incorporated into healthy relationship and marriage programs across the country. The African American Healthy Marriage Initiative and the Hispanic Healthy Marriage Initiative have helped ensure that those who need and desire these programs are served in a culturally competent manner that recognizes the strengths, history and significant set of barriers minority groups face in forming and maintaining lasting unions.
- Use of **existing networks** to increase the scale of fatherhood work. Important vehicles for the sustainability of fatherhood efforts are those national networks where children are found and fathers have value to add (e.g., Head Start programs). Other networks that can be leveraged include institutions where large numbers of men can be found and where a focus on fatherhood would add value (e.g., the military, prisons). The for-profit community can become involved by providing supports for family life through their human resources and employee assistance programs. The faith-based community has a history of effort and success on behalf of men in prison. These allies can magnify the results that supportive policy identifies and sets in motion.
- **Jobs.** Low-income, under-employed, and unemployed fathers and mothers face significant barriers to work such as low education levels and limited work histories that can be complicated by lack of transportation, housing instability, health and mental health problems, substance abuse, and involvement in the criminal justice system. Many programs have had difficulty establishing employment services that improve how non-resident fathers fare in the labor market. Considerable attention needs to be dedicated to this pivotal issue.<sup>125</sup>
- **Fathering from prison and upon return.** Promising approaches to overcoming the challenges incarcerated and returning dads face include fathering and relationship education programs in prisons, opportunities for enhanced child visitation, educational and job readiness programs, substance abuse treatment, and child support debt forgiveness or leveraging. Policies can support successful reintegration that breaks the cycle of crime and recidivism and restores family relationships. Public Law 110-199: “Second Chance Act of 2007: Community Safety through Recidivism Prevention” is one such policy. Faith-based re-entry is a strategy that fits well within a community response to incarceration, typically offering prison ministry and counseling for family members left behind; pre-release counseling that includes working with both the family and the community and focusing on training and service supports for those returning from incarceration; and post release counseling (including employment, housing, and training). “Healing Communities” is a promising model of formal and informal support, volunteer service, networking, and advocacy wherein communities of faith minister to members of their own congregations who are affected by crime and the criminal justice system. A Healing Community draws upon the unique strengths of the faith community and provides what

programs and services generally cannot -- the transformation of hearts and minds and the building of relationships that support people.<sup>126</sup>

- Systematic availability of **practitioner information** and guidance. The National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse ([www.fatherhood.gov](http://www.fatherhood.gov)) provides a first-source location for professionals operating Responsible Fatherhood programs, where they can get the latest data and research, promising practices, operational tips, state profiles, and other resources based on the field's knowledge and experience. The National Fatherhood Leaders Group, a coalition of field-shaping organizations and individuals, is a repository of experience and expertise for Responsible Fatherhood policy, practice, and history and a source of assistance for beginning fatherhood initiatives and acquiring programmatic expertise.

### The Well-Being of African American Children

Research confirms that children are better off when their fathers are actively engaged in their lives. It also documents that fathers are more likely to be engaged if they can contribute financially and have a good relationship with the child's mother. This paper has described the particular barriers that African American fathers face in positioning themselves for successful parenting. In this section we see the consequences to children if government and fathers do not accept the mutual and interlocking responsibility that underwrites better child outcomes.

First and foremost, children of color experience the tougher odds their fathers face. For example:

- African American children are the most likely of all children to live in **single-parent families** – 65%, compared to 49% of American Indian children, 37% of Hispanic children, 23% of non-Hispanic white children, and 17% of Asian American and Pacific Islander children.<sup>127</sup>
- Racial inequities continue to play out for Black children's families, rendering them more **economically vulnerable**. The 2007 data show that 35% of African American children lived in poverty (see Figure 7).
- Given these structural factors, the many indicators of child well-being such as school performance, emotional health, and behavioral risk-taking also show disproportionate **negative impacts** on children of color.

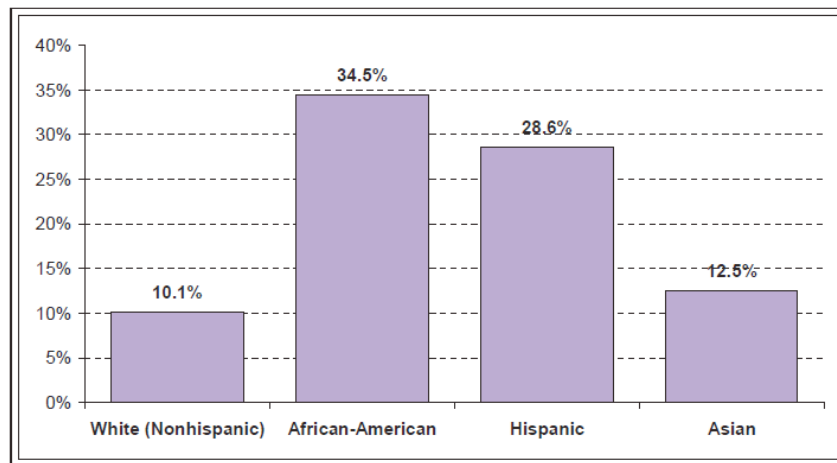
*"Reports like this should remind us that programs like TANF and the former AFDC are about people, especially the most vulnerable among us; and so it is not enough to claim that progress will be made by merely reducing the number of beneficiaries when we need to ask ourselves what will happen to these people, especially the children, if the safety net is removed."*

Rep. Jim McDermott

The interacting factors of poverty and family structure alone give millions of African American children tough odds for having what they need to grow up healthy and high achieving. Layered into these already challenging factors is the likelihood that these children reside in low-opportunity settings where the focus is more on their problems than their potential. Stereotypes that fuel low expectations of African American children and their neighborhoods -- operationalized through the attitudes and

behaviors of school officials, police, caseworkers, and the media – can become their own self-fulfilling prophecies. Further, some of the children’s peers and nearby role models may already have given up or decided on ultimately self-defeating behaviors geared to the only kinds of success they can envision within the limited boundaries of their perceived opportunities. Without alternatives to these circumstances, yet another generation is threatened by loss of their hopes and dreams, and the nation is poorer without their contributions. Fathers are powerful forces against this intergenerational despair if they have the resources they need to be effective wage-earners and parents.

**Figure 7.** Poverty Rates for Children by Race and Ethnicity: 2007



**Source:** Congressional Research Service (CRS) based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

**Notes:** Poverty rate for African-American children excludes those who reported that they were African-American in combination with another race. Same for Asian children.

## **H.R. 2979 Julia Carson Responsible Fathers and Healthy Families Act of 2009**

The progressive scaling back of federal support to low-income Americans is taking a devastating toll on Black fathers, families and communities. Intervention is imperative for the well-being of our children, as well as America's global competitiveness. Wealth-building programs are needed that provide pathways to training for low-skilled Black fathers so they can advance to better jobs and provide for their children – who should not be sentenced to repeat another cycle of poverty.

Senators Evan Bayh (D-IN) and Representative Danny K. Davis (D-IL) introduced the Julia Carson Responsible Fatherhood and Healthy Families Act of 2009 on June 19, 2009. The House version of the bill was named after Julia Carson, the late Indianapolis Congresswoman who championed fatherhood throughout her career. As seen in Table 1, the pending Responsible Fatherhood and Healthy Families Act of 2009 seeks to:

- ✓ remove some of the government penalties on married families,
- ✓ ensure that support payments go to children and families and do not result in loss of food assistance for eligible families,
- ✓ expand fatherhood services to the formerly incarcerated,
- ✓ fund adult literacy initiatives and job training programs for fathers

It is written to provide states with an infrastructure to:

- ✓ implement and evaluate public--private workforce and career development partnerships
- ✓ offer court-supervised employment for fathers at risk of incarceration due to failure to make child support payments
- ✓ provide transitional job programs for ex-offenders and other disproportionately unemployed populations
- ✓ restore cuts in federal child support and require states to pass through 100% of collected child support payments
- ✓ ensure equal funding for programs such as mediation and conflict resolution, financial literacy and employment services.

Further, the Julia Carson Responsible Fatherhood and Healthy Families Act of 2009:

- ✓ expands the Earned Income Tax Credit by reducing marriage penalties and increasing EITC for no child and noncustodial parents
- ✓ adjusts the Food Stamp program to assure that child support payments do not result in loss of food assistance for families who depend on payments by non-custodial parents
- ✓ provides funding for partnerships between domestic violence prevention organizations and Fatherhood or Marriage programs to train staff in domestic violence services and provide services to families affected by domestic violence, while developing best practices in domestic violence prevention.

Below are specific features in H.R. 2979 that relate to some of the structural and personal barriers described in this report.

## Aim

### H.R. 2979 Provision

#### Healthy Relationship, Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood

1. **Increases program funding to \$200 million/yr** (up from \$150 million), with the responsible fatherhood grant set-a-side to \$100 million/yr (up from \$50 million) and extends funding through FY 2015.
2. Expands allowable fatherhood activities to include: (i) **promoting healthy relationships and marriages**, (ii) “educating youth who are not yet parents about the economic, social, and family consequences of early parenting, helping participants in **fatherhood programs** work with their own children to break the cycle of early parenthood”, and (iii) extends activities to all low-income noncustodial parents.
3. Creates new **Healthy Family Partnership Grants** available for **domestic violence prevention and intervention** to partner agencies, defined as those receiving funds to promote healthy marriage or responsible fatherhood who work with organizations with demonstrated expertise in working with survivors of domestic violence. Funds can be used for assessments, providing services, technical assistance, and implementation of safe visitation and exchange programs – 10% of funds must go to high schools and higher education for education services for **teaching healthy relationships, responsible parenting, importance of non-violence**, etc. Also adds section addressing required agency procedures to address **domestic violence prevention**.

#### Child Support

1. Funding – restores cuts made in the Deficit Reduction Act to federal child support funds (American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 only temporarily restored the funds until Sept. 30, 2010).
2. Fees – repeals the annual \$25 parental service fee enacted by the Deficit Reduction Act for families who have never received TANF and receive at least \$500/yr in child support.
3. States cannot recoup Medicaid-covered birth costs through child support.
4. States **cannot treat incarceration as “voluntary unemployment.”**
5. States must have procedures to review and, if appropriate, reduce child support debt assigned to the state.
6. Eliminates the requirement that families who receive TANF cash assistance assign their child support rights to the states. Under current law, all families that receive TANF cash must assign (legally turn over) their rights to child support to the state to reimburse it for the costs of cash assistance.
7. **Pass-through & Disregard** - eliminates the TANF assignment and requires full distribution to current and former TANF recipients, requires TANF disregard equal to earned income disregard (to ensure that child support payments to families do not count as income and result in loss of food stamps). Under current law, states may, but are not required to, pass-through to the family any or all child support. H.R. 2979 also requires states to treat child support payments in the same way as it treats earned income in determining the amount disregarded when calculating the amount and type of TANF assistance and requires foster care collections to be used in the best interests of the child.

<div>Employment &amp; Co-parenting Programs</div>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Creates grants to states through Health and Human Services for Court Supervised or IV-D (child support) Supervised <b>Employment Programs for noncustodial parents (NCPs)</b> with barriers to employment, a history of nonpayment of child support obligations, and need of employment services to pay child support, this <b>includes ex-offenders</b>.</li> <li>2. Goals include helping NCPs maintain <b>unsubsidized employment, increase child support and improve NCPs' relationships with their kids and their children's custodial parent</b>.</li> <li>3. <b>Fund financial literacy programs and budgeting education, employment services, and mediation and conflict resolution for low-income parents</b></li> <li>4. Creates grants to states through Department of Labor for <b>Transitional Jobs</b> for individuals age 16 – 35 who fall into categories that are disproportionately chronically unemployed (lack high school diploma, limited English proficiency, aged out of foster care, offender status, e.g.) and particularly for parents or expectant parents. Goals include combining temporary, subsidized jobs with skill development and barrier removal for 30-40 hours/wk.</li> <li>5. Creates grants to states through Department of Labor for <b>Public-Private Career Pathways Partnership Grants to serve priority areas with high rates of poverty, youth unemployment, drop out, or low income single parent families</b>. Goals include performance-based partnerships intended to create or expand career pathways with employers in specific industry or occupational sectors and to fill in gaps with “bridge” programs.</li> </ol>
<div>NCP EITC</div>	<p><b>Expands the EITC for workers with no qualifying children</b> and creates enhanced credit for noncustodial parents supporting their children (those current on child support with IV-D case).</p>
<div>Food Stamps (now SNAP)</div>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. 20 percent food stamp <b>deduction for child support received</b>.</li> <li>2. Noncustodial parent households can claim a food stamp <b>deduction or exclusion for child support paid</b>.</li> </ol>
<div>TANF</div>	<p><b>Prohibits unequal treatment of two-parent families</b> receiving TANF, ensuring the state work participation standard is the same for all families. Under current law, states must meet two work participations standards --- have 50% of all families with a work-eligible individual be engaged in work and also have 90% of two-parent families be engaged in work. H.R. 2979 would eliminate the separate 90% standard. States would still be required to have 50% of all families with a work-eligible individual, including two-parent families with two work-eligible individuals, engaged in work.</p>

1. As a condition of their IV-D plan with the federal government, states must **assess policy barriers to employment and financial support of children**, including the process of setting and modifying child support obligations, particularly for low-income parents, the **treatment of arrearages, impact of state criminal laws and law enforcement practices on employability, impact of debt on employment retention, state practices related to providing prisoners and ex-prisoners** with valid identification documents upon release and any other **barriers to healthy family formation or sustainable economic opportunity** for both parents.
2. Creates grants to states through Health and Human Services to establish or support commissions to make the state assessments described above and to make recommendations on ways to improve State law in the best interests of children and families, and appropriates \$3 million

*"Our current system too often has benefits set up in a way that encourages single parent households rather than two-parent families. The unintended consequence, of course, is that parents have a disincentive to remain together. My grandmother's vision- and this bill- focuses on changing the system so that it's more pro-family and creates incentives for both parents to work together to raise their children."*

Rep. Andre Carson



## Conclusion

Our nation's well-being depends on tapping the potential of each new generation. In an increasingly diverse nation, where communities of color are projected to become the majority of the U.S. population by 2050,<sup>128</sup> we must rededicate our attention to ensuring that ALL children have the opportunity to succeed. African American fathers face tougher odds for doing well by their children. We cannot be strong as a nation until these tougher odds are addressed.

To address the tougher odds faced by African American fathers (and other fathers of color), policies and programs for fathers and their families must be race-informed and should be assessed for their equitable impact. A father needs financial stability, a good relationship with the mother of his child, and positive fathering skills. Understanding the particular barriers that African American fathers face – and how policy itself can sometimes impose these barriers -- will produce improved policies and practices that yield results for a more diverse set of fathers. Improved results will follow from the recognition that some fathers are differently situated as a consequence of broader racial dynamics and thus may need different supports and services to achieve the aspirations of responsible fatherhood – an approach known as “targeted universalism.”<sup>129</sup> For men of color, who are disproportionately relegated to low-opportunity neighborhoods and communities, *targeted* universalism would address issues like the following:

- Because schools have too often under-served young men (and young women) of color, attention must be given to ensuring the **workforce preparation** needed for fathers to become reliable wage-earners.
- Because **good jobs** are typically located outside their neighborhoods or communities, attention must be given both to transportation and non-discriminatory access to available jobs.
- Because men of color are disproportionately caught up in the criminal justice system, attention must be given to providing opportunities for active fathering from prison, and offering skills development that will enable the successful **reintegration** of men to their families and communities upon re-entry.
- If men's circumstances have led them to conclude that they cannot be — or need not be — responsible fathers, attention must be given to setting realistic expectations for fulfilling parental obligations, combined with programs and supports that enable fathers to contribute productively to their families and communities in ways that reinforce **mutual responsibility**.

We will be a stronger nation with stronger families when we intentionally address the poverty and racial disparities that confront African American fathers and their families. Understanding the “bigger picture” is a necessary step for doing just that. As the nation embarks upon an era of hope and change, we must not lose sight of the current economic state of all struggling families. The gradual but persistent scaling back of federal support for families living below the poverty line will not yield the results we need. The lives of poor, low-income Americans, of whom Black families constitute a disproportionate share, hang in the balance. If their lives hang in the balance, our nation's future does as well. The return on the public investment in struggling families is nothing short of a stronger nation — for generations to come.

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